EDITORIAL

The customer versus the container

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In a recent conference presentation, John Wilbanks, director of Science Commons, called on journal publishers to focus on ''the customer, not the container.'' Speaking to the ''2009 IN Conference'' of the Society for Scholarly Publishing, Wilbanks pointed out that publishing has traditionally focused on the article, the book, or the journal; in other words, publishing has focused on the item that *contains* information [1]. It is time, he said, to stop focusing on the information *container* and start focusing instead on the information *customer* and what the customer wants to do with the information in the container. It is time to stop concentrating on how information is delivered and start concentrating on creating value by enabling the customer to manipulate the information itself. The container, he believes, is becoming commoditized. In a commoditized environment, the only way publishers can distinguish themselves is by adding features that create value for the consumer. Wilbanks posited that these features are not improvements to the container but features that enhance the value of the information itself.

Reading the articles in this issue, it struck me that librarians, too, may be in danger of concentrating too much on the container and not enough on the customer. Like journals, libraries are in the process of becoming commoditized. When a product becomes a commodity, it has reached a point in its development where one brand has no features that differentiate it from other brands. Gasoline is a good example of a commodity and toasters are another; many think that personal computers will soon become a commodity as well. The gas at a Shell station is hard to distinguish from that at the Valero station or at the local mini-mart. All toasters toast bread, English muffins, and pita bread. Both a Hewlitt Packard and a Dell PC can easily access the Internet and run Microsoft Office.

The library has traditionally distinguished itself from other information sources by providing long-term access to organized, quality information. Now, in common with gas station owners and toaster manufacturers, librarians find that customers have trouble distinguishing our product, the information that we provide, from that delivered by other sources. We may know that our databases have greater precision and recall and that our content is more highly vetted; however, many of our users feel that what they can retrieve from search engines and read in freely available issues of scholarly journals is just as satisfactory. We may believe that our libraries provide the best place to study and that, because of our highly trained staff, the library is the best place to seek assistance when doing research, but for many of our users, searching on an Internet book at the kitchen table is just as productive and the advice of their colleagues or fellow students just as helpful. We may pride ourselves on grouping books on the shelves by subject and providing subject access in our catalogs, but consumers may find keyword searches on Amazon or Google just as efficient.

When products become commodities, producers seek to differentiate their brands from other similar products by developing additional services or qualities attractive to consumers. In theory, this could mean perfecting the product itself. Gasoline companies could develop better gas, or Oster could produce a toaster that provided faster or more even toasting. But at some point, the product is satisfactory and any improvements far too costly to justify their development. Then, rather than improve the product itself, which is now a commodity, producers introduce new features or services that allow the product to be used in new or different ways. Gas stations offer car washes, computers double as televisions, and toasters start turning into small ovens. As consumers, we may complain that we are now paying for things we could easily do without, but it is all part of the means by which producers try to differentiate themselves in a commoditized market. Wilbanks suggests that journals, too, are becoming commoditized, because so much scholarly information is now available from other sources. Because delivery mechanisms (the containers) are probably satisfactory, he encourages publishers to differentiate their brands by focusing on what he believes scientists want to do with the literature, rather than focusing on improving the container itself. He calls on publishers to add to their traditional functions of registration, certification, dissemination, and preservation three additional functions: integration, annotation, and federation [2]. Publishers should integrate their content with other digital information; annotate that content by linking published content with blog posts, database entries, data sets, and so on; and federate their content with other relevant digital materials.

What about libraries? Our focus has also often been on enhancing the container. Ludwig's article in this issue describes no less than seventy-eight recent library renovation projects, many of which enhance information ''containers,'' a.k.a., libraries, with very attractive features designed to welcome users and encourage their use of the information resources we provide [3]. These days, of course, the library container may be virtual rather than physical, and so libraries continue to devote money and attention to purchasing and developing technologies that promise to make information more accessible. Like gas stations that continue to dispense gas or computers that continue to crunch numbers, it is probably logical to assume that libraries will continue to be places that provide spaces and technologies for accessing information.

However, as noted above, other entities are now providing spaces to consult information and the tools to access it. To remain competitive in our commoditized world, we must add services and/or content that differentiates us from other similar products. What services can we add that will make our brand attractive? Should we, too, start to focus more on what users would like to do with the information we provide, so that it becomes more useful to them, and less on the way in which that information is delivered?

One reason to focus on developing value-added services for the information customer, rather than improving the container, may be that the latter is very hard to do. Just as it is hard to improve commoditized products like gasoline or toasters, improving the technology that delivers information can be very difficult. Several articles in the current issue describe efforts to enhance information delivery that met with only mixed success. Shedlock et al. discuss one library's experience when users were offered the opportunity to customize access to library online holdings, and relatively few took advantage of the opportunity [4]. Steinberg et al. reported on the experience at Stanford's Lane Library when the library introduced a recommending system to encourage use of clinical information sources; evidence suggested that few users took advantage of these recommendations [5]. Coberly et al. experimented with targeted information prescriptions in a medical clinic, where only a minority of users took the time to ''fill'' the prescriptions [6]. Each of these studies suggests ways in which the proposed improvements might be modified to make them more appealing to information consumers. However, it may be no coincidence that all of these less-than-successful initiatives focused on improving the container, the way information is delivered, rather than on developing services that would enhance the manner in which the information can be used. Perhaps, as Wilbanks suggested to publishers, this is no longer a fruitful avenue for distinguishing our brand. Perhaps we, too, need to focus on developing services and features that enhance the ways our users can use the information we provide. One example of the latter approach can be found in Grefsheim et al.'s report in this issue on the success of the informationist program at the National Institutes of Health [7]. That successful program developed new librarian-delivered services based on an understanding of how scientists use information. Reports such as that by Haines et al. on the information needs of research scientists [8] and Sutton et al. on what users value in terms of library space [9] provide additional evidence that can be used to develop value-added services.

Librarians have skills that are missing from our competitors' portfolios. Health sciences librarians in particular understand the information-seeking habits of our clientele and the kinds of information they value. We work closely with our physicians, students, and, in many cases, patients, and this proximity should position us to develop the tools and services that will allow them to use the information we provide in new ways. However, our time and attention is limited. Concentrating on how the medical profession or patient population uses information means spending less time considering improvements to the container in which the information is housed and delivered. Giving up that traditional focus will not be easy, but in a commoditized world, it may be essential. More research on what our users would like to do with the information our containers provide will be an important step in moving in this direction.

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